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ABSTRACT

Perhaps 8 million children spend the after-school hours at home alone. In the absence of adult supervision, many of these youths are likely to engage in delinquent or other high-risk activities. Research suggests that after-school programs can help to prevent youths from engaging in these activities in two ways: by providing constructive activities for youths, and by encouraging the development of constructive adult-child relationships. There are a variety of after-school programs available to parents. However, when parents do not or cannot enroll their children in after-school activities, research suggests that it is especially important for parents to be engaged in their child's life. (OR)

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Focus on After-School Time for Violence Prevention

Peggy Patten and Anne S. Robertson

An estimated eight million school-age children are home alone after school (U.S. Department of Education, 2001). These are the hours when violent juvenile crime peaks and when youth are most likely to experiment with alcohol, tobacco, drugs, and sex (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999). Although many older children care for themselves after school for an hour or two until a parent comes home, research suggests that some of these children are at risk for poor grades and risky behavior (Pettit et al., 1997, p. 517; National Institute on Out-of-School Time, 2001, p. 2; Dwyer, et al., 1990). This Digest discusses the role of after-school programs, adult-child relationships, and parental monitoring in violence prevention for middle and high school youth.

After-School Programs and Crime Reduction

After-school programs help to reduce juvenile crime and violence because they offer alternative activities for children and youth during their out-of-school time. Several studies support the hypothesis that participation in youth development programs decreases involvement in unhealthy and high-risk activities (Quinn, 1999, pp. 111-112). Fight Crime: Invest in Kids, a national organization of police chiefs, sheriffs, police association presidents, prosecutors, and crime survivors, draws on outcome data from high-quality youth development programs to encourage public investment in high-quality after-school and summer programs for youth. This anti-crime organization reports that high-quality youth development programs provide "responsible adult supervision, constructive activities, and insulation from deleterious pressure from peers and older children during high-risk hours" (Fox & Newman, 1997, p. 4).

Adult-Child Relationships and Crime Reduction

In addition to helping youth make constructive use of after-school hours, after-school programs provide teens with opportunities to develop caring relationships with adults. Supportive adult-child relationships are a central component of high-quality after-school programs (Roth et al., 1998, pp. 435-436). Research on resilience (often defined as the ability to face, overcome, and be strengthened by adversity) in children identifies "protective factors" in the family, school, and community environments that can help reverse or minimize what otherwise might be poor outcomes for children (Bushweller, 1995). Caring and supportive relationships are cited as a critical protective factor for youth (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998).

Other research has found similar effects of constructive adult-child relationships. In surveys of more than 100,000 youth in 200 communities, the SEARCH Institute found that high-quality relationships with parents and other adults, accompanied by constructive uses of time, are critical for healthy youth development. Relationships were among the 40 critical factors, or "assets," identified by SEARCH in its surveys, that appeared to help prevent risky behaviors among youth (Benson et al., 1998; Roehlkepartain, 1998). A study of Chicago neighborhoods also showed benefits of reduced overall violence, even in poor neighborhoods, when community residents increased their level of positive involvement with children (Sampson & Morenoff, 1997).

Options for After-School Programming

After-school programming can range from a group of teens hanging out at a friend's house and playing basketball when a parent or other responsible adult is home, to more formal after-school activities, including "drop-in" programs that are provided by community organizations, licensed programs with highly structured curricula offered through schools, and neighborhood programs that integrate school and community resources (Gootman, 2000). Increased federal support for after-school programs through the U.S. Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative has greatly expanded the number of after-school programs in public school settings around the country (U.S. Department of Education, 2001).

After-school programs for youth are sponsored by a diverse array of organizations and may be difficult for parents to find. Public libraries, YMCAs, Boys and Girls Clubs, and local child care resource and referral agencies (CCR&Rs) can help parents find after-school options in their community. CCR&Rs also often have information on how to know when a child is ready for self-care and can suggest resources to prepare a child to be on his or her own. To find local CCR&Rs, parents can call Child Care Aware at 1-800-424-2246.

Parental Monitoring and Crime Reduction

Despite the potential benefits of after-school programs, there are many reasons why parents do not use them. Programs may be unavailable, unaffordable, or of poor quality (Larner et al., 1999). Older children and young teens may refuse to attend programs that resemble child care. Parents may feel uncertain about how much freedom is appropriate for children and youth who are beyond the traditional child care years. The Research Institute on Addictions suggests that children raised in a family that is emotionally supportive and that actively monitors its children will have lower levels of problem behaviors (Barnes, 1995, p. 1). High levels of parental monitoring—defined as "parents' knowledge of their child's whereabouts, activities, and friends" (Jacobson & Crockett, 2000, p. 66)—are associated with greater academic achievement, lower levels of depression, lower

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levels of antisocial or delinquent behavior, and lower levels of sexual behavior (Jacobson & Crockett, 2000, p. 90). In situations where older children are home alone, studies indicate that when parental monitoring is provided, children in self-care are less likely to participate in risk-taking behaviors (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000, p. 6). Parental monitoring does not mean that parents have to be a constant physical presence in their child's world. Consistent, firm control and monitoring can occur from a distance (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000, p. 6). If older children are at home alone after school, it is important that a parent is available to provide remote supervision with phone calls or regular discussions of after-school plans (Steinberg & Levine, 1997).

Although middle and high school youth may think they are autonomous and rebel at times against parental monitoring, parents remain responsible for supervising their teenagers (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000, p. 6). In a series of group interviews commissioned by the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, young people reported wanting safe places to be with caring adults and other young people (Quinn, 1999, p. 97). This preference for "learning, growth, structure, and safety" was also voiced by 800 teens in the Community Counts Project, a study of 120 youth-based organizations in 34 cities (DeAngelis, 2001, p. 61).

Conclusion

After-school hours are prime times for youth to be victims or perpetrators of juvenile crime and to experiment with health-compromising behaviors such as tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use, and early sexual activity (Snyder & Sickmund, 1999; Fox & Newman, 1997). Supervised after-school programs can reduce juvenile crime and involvement in risk-taking behaviors by providing youth with constructive activities and opportunities to develop healthy relationships with adults. It is especially helpful when parents remain psychologically available to monitor their teenagers' activities and friends even when older youth are ready to be home alone after school hours (Jacobson & Crockett, 2000). Beneath the cool veneer of many adolescents is the need to feel connected to and cared about by their parents and other significant adults. Research supports the effectiveness of these strategies in protecting middle and high school youth from risk and from harm (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

For More Information

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